The modern western world currently does not favour kingship as a style of government, and often fears that, unless their powers are constrained, kings will become tyrants. Nevertheless, rule by one man has always remained a possible political solution as well as a threat. In the eighteenth century Benjamin Franklin, one of the Founding Fathers of the United States Constitution, thought there was “a natural inclination in mankind to Kingly Government” (which he also hoped in the United States might long be delayed).¹ Indeed, throughout most of medieval Europe, “monarchy was not simply the best possible form of government; it was almost the only conceivable form,”² and after the first flush of Islam’s anti-monarchical orthodoxy, the same sentiment prevailed in the medieval Muslim world, especially in Iran, where in the eleventh century it was considered that “in every time and age God…chooses one member of the human race and, having endowed him with kingly virtues, entrusts him with the interests of the world and the well-being of His servants.”³ So in antiquity, Thucydides suggested that the earliest democracy, that of fifth-century Athens, could not avoid the temptation of “rule by the first man”.⁴

On a superficial consideration the institution of kingship would appear to be unproblematic—in that it seems to inhere simply in rule by one man. Nevertheless, questions about kingship abound. What defines a king, and when does he become a tyrant? What can make the rule of one man

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¹ The Founding Fathers of the United States considered elective monarchy as the basis for their Constitution (Stourzh, Alexander Hamilton, 38), and the debate continues as to the extent, and desirability, of presidential “kingly power”: see e.g., Schlesinger Jr. The Imperial Presidency; Rowstow, “President, Prime Minister or Constitutional Monarch”, 740–49.
² Guenée, States and Rulers, 67.
⁴ Thucydides 2.65.9.
legitimate? What is the nature of kingly power? Is true kingship absolute kingship? Can kingship ever actually be absolute? Does kingship inhere in the man, in his blood, his virtue or his charisma, or is it something that he can obtain for himself? Or is kingship separate from the man? Does it reside primarily in the office? To what extent is kingship a political institution and a constitutional office, and to what extent a discourse of power relationships mediated through office-holding? To what extent is it a sacral or political office? What does one do when the legitimate king is incompetent? How is the realm of a king defined, and how does a king relate to his kingdom?

For those who lived under kings in the ancient and medieval periods, both in Europe and the Middle East, these were pressing issues. Clearly, different cultures produced different ways of responding to the questions and very different solutions. In order to explore some of the issues relating to kingship, this current volume presents papers that consider kingship in a variety of periods and in a range of political contexts, from Achaemenid Iran of the sixth century BC to medieval Europe and Safavid Iran of the sixteenth to seventeenth centuries. The connecting link (and the conceptual impetus) behind much of this lies in Iranian history, which is both the starting and ending point of the volume. The initial sub-title under which the conference presentations were assembled was “from Alexander to the King of Kings” and reflected not only the interests of the convenors but also the supposition that the ancient world became a common root for both medieval Iran and medieval Europe. But apart from the obvious chronological reversal (the earliest King of Kings predating Alexander), it quickly became clearer as the discussion took shape that Alexander’s and indeed the Greeks’ formative encounter with kingship was with the Iranian kingship of the Achaemenids and their founding figure, Cyrus the Great, and it was Cyrus rather than Alexander who became the exemplar of the ideal ruler. Except, ironically, in Iran, where the memory of Cyrus and the Achaemenids was lost to history until the nineteenth century, and it was their distant successors, the Sasanians, who became

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5 The volume arises out of a conference held in Cambridge in September 2008 and the work of those able to attend. Several of the presentations have not been included in this volume and nor have additional chapters been commissioned to fill some of the more obvious gaps (Rome, Byzantium). The Byzantine world was represented by Florentina Badalanova’s paper, “Envisaging the Ideal Ruler: St Constantine the Great in Slavia Orthodoxa”.

6 See e.g. Amanat, “Legend, Legitimacy and Making a National Narrative”, esp. 327–33; also below, n. 26.